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DANS LA TRANCHEE

Water Color Sketch by William Adolphe Lambrecht,
Corporal, French Army Bicycle Corps

From the Collection of Drawings, Water Colors and Paintings
Made by French Soldiers in the Trenches, on Exhibition at the
Institut Français aux Etats-Unis. (Museum of French Art) New
York City

POEMS OF THE TRENCHES

OF the poetry, which the war has inspired, none contains more concentrated poignancy than the poems printed below. They are understood to be the work of a hitherto unknown writer, Wilfrid William Gibson.

So remarkable is the quality of his verse, that it seems a pity not to know whether he actually has been in the trenches or not. For when impressions of fighting are as vivid as these, with as many secrets as these seem to hold, we deem it—the psychology of war being as deeply interesting as it is—imperative to be told if the author himself has fought, if he has only talked with soldiers, or if it is to his eager investigating sympathy that we owe these remarkable glimpses of the working of the modern warrior's mind. Their evaluation as literature would not, however, be changed by the knowledge; for, whatever the process of acquiring the facts may be, it is by the presentation of those facts that the artist stands or falls. And he assuredly convinces us.

Sympathy and irony strive for the palm throughout. The verses are a monument to the wantonness of it all, to the cheapness of life in war, the carelessness as to the individual, the disregard alike of promise and performance, the elimination of personality. When war is declared, said Napoleon, there are no longer men, there is only a man. Napoleon spoke for the clear-sighted general in command; the author speaks for the perplexed soldier under orders,

and, doing so, illustrates the other side of the medal. In war, he says, in effect, there are no longer men, there is no longer man, there are only sports of chance, pullers of triggers, bewildered fulfillers of instructions, cynical acceptors of destiny. Here is a typical lyric:

THE FATHER

That was his sort.
It didn't matter
What we were at
But he must chatter
Of this and that
His little son
Had said or done;
Till, as he told
The fiftieth time
Without a change
How three-year-old
Prattled a rhyme,
They got the range
And cut him short.

The stunnedness of the trench fighting man is admirably indicated. Here is one sidelight:

HILL BORN

I sometimes wonder if it's really true
I ever knew
Another life
Than this unending strife
With unseen enemies in lowland mud,
And wonder if my blood
Thrilled ever to the tune
Of clean winds blowing through an April noon
Mile after sunny mile
On the green ridges of the Windy Gile.

The poet has more than one poem suggested by the duality, the division of the young soldier, mazed by the strangeness of it all, the noise, the constant yet capricious menace, into two separate entities, the one who acts and the

one who looks on astonished and incredulous. Thus:

BACK

They ask me where I've been,
And what I've done and seen.
But what can I reply
Who know it wasn't I,
But someone just like me,
Who went across the sea
And with my head and hands
Killed men in foreign lands, . . .
Though I must bear the blame
Because he bore my name.

Some hint of the same idea, carried further to the changing effect on a youth which sudden immersion in all these astounding and utterly exorbitant new realities must have, is to be found in

THE RETURN

He went, and he was gay to go;
And I smiled on him as he went.
My boy, 'twas well he couldn't know
My darkest dread, or what it meant. . . .
Just what it meant to smile and smile
And let my son go cheerily. . . .
My son . . . and wondering all the while
What stranger would come back to me.

We had not seen this aspect of fighting, or rather of the effect of fighting treated before. Finally, in this group, there is

THE QUIET

I could not understand the sudden quiet—
The sudden darkness—in the crash of fight,
The din and glare of day quenched in a twinkling
In utter starless night.

I lay an age and idly gazed at nothing,
Half-puzzled that I could not lift my head;
And then I knew somehow that I was lying
Among the other dead.

In a less highly and searchingly imaginative key are such grimly and cynically humorous etchings as

THE JOKE

He'd even have his joke
While we were sitting tight,
And so he needs must poke
His silly head in sight
To whisper some new jest
Chortling, but as he spoke
A rifle cracked . . .
And now God knows when I shall hear
the rest!

and:

HIS FATHER

I quite forgot to put the spigot in.
It's just come over me. . . . And it is queer
To think he'll not care if we lose or win
And yet be jumping mad about that beer.
I left it running full. He must have said
A thing or two. I'd give my stripes to hear
What he will say if I'm reported dead
Before he gets me told about the beer.

It will be seen that the verses show yet another reminder of how many different ways there are of considering things, and while they lead forth a no less determined fighting man, they choose only to exhibit the incorrigible fatalism, the pathetic patience, the side-long humour of him.